

Emergency Food Stamp Assistance Available to Ike Victims

AUSTIN - Texas will be providing emergency food stamps to Hurricane Ike victims who qualify and will automatically replace benefits for program participants in the storm's path.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) sought and received a federal waiver to make the emergency assistance available to low-income individuals and families living in any of the 29 counties that have been declared disaster areas.

"We know that many Texans saw an unexpected loss of income this month because Hurricane Ike disrupted their jobs, their workplaces and their lives," said Texas Health and Human Services Executive Commissioner Albert Hawkins. "Those Texans may now qualify for special hurricane assistance to provide food for their families while they get back on their feet."

Eligible Texans in disaster areas can receive up to two months of food stamp benefits by calling 2-1-1 or applying at any HHSC benefits office through Oct. 17. The person submitting the application needs to provide proof of identity and residence, such as a driver license. A family of four earning up to \$2,915 this month may qualify for assistance. Applicants also will have to answer questions about their bank account balances and other assets. People who provide additional documentation may qualify for benefits for a longer period.

The federal waiver applies to Angelina, Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Cherokee, Fort Bend, Galveston, Grimes, Hardin, Harris, Houston, Jasper, Jefferson, Liberty, Madison, Matagorda, Montgomery, Nacogdoches, Newton, Orange, Polk, Sabine, San Augustine, San Jacinto, Trinity, Tyler, Walker, Waller and Washington counties. Additional areas may be added later as damage assessments continue.

Current food stamp recipients living in areas declared a disaster will get replacement benefits. HHSC will automatically replace a portion of September benefits for food stamp recipients in those 29 counties. The replacement benefits will help more than 500,000 Texans in areas where power outages or flooding are likely to have damaged or destroyed a family's food supply.

Food stamp benefits are placed on a Lone Star card that food stamp recipients use like a credit or debit card to purchase groceries. Food stamp recipients in counties declared a disaster area do not need to visit an office for the replacement benefits, which will automatically be placed on their Lone Star cards later this week.

The federal government also granted permission for hurricane victims to use food stamps to purchase hot ready-to-eat foods. These items, which are not normally allowed under federal rules, will help families who are unable to return to their homes immediately.

For hurricane victims outside the 29 counties designated as disaster areas, the U.S. Department of Agriculture gave the state permission to give food stamp recipients 20 days - twice the normal amount of time - to report if they lost food in the storm. These food stamp recipients will need to contact their local HHSC benefits office to report the loss of food and apply for replacement benefits. Once the state verifies that the family lived in an area that flooded or lost power for an extended period of time, the state can issue replacement food stamp benefits to the family.

Texans can find the locations of HHSC benefits offices by calling 2-1-1 or visiting <<http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/>> www.hhsc.state.tx.us. People are encouraged to call 2-1-1 or the office number to verify that the office is operating because many benefits offices remain without power.

HHSC is working to establish alternate office locations and applications methods for people in areas hardest hit by Ike. These locations and application options will be posted on the HHSC website, <<http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/>> www.hhsc.state.tx.us, as they become available.

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